CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter will describe the process of gathering data – how the researcher collected data, what methods were used and the obstacles encountered. It is believed that this is a very important part of ethnographic study, especially since ethnography as a field is still in its early stages. As Chitravelu points out,

> " . . . ethnography is still in an incipient stage. And it is important that the field methods used, and problems encountered, be recorded for the benefit of future ethnographers, and for the improvement of ethnography as a heuristic"
>
> (Chitravelu, 1997, quoted in Johns, 1998:40)

3.2 Conceptualization

At the start of any research is the choice of field and methods. The catalyst for this research was the course English for Special Purpose (ESP) conducted by Universiti Malaya for the Masters in ESL programme. ESP seems to be a more focussed form of general language teaching. Pedagogically speaking, ESP is more relevant for teachers of higher-learning institution or specialist institutions such as technical or vocational schools. Thus the researcher who aims to teach at these institutions, was attracted to ESP and chose to conduct a study in this field.

In ESP, the ethnographic method is very much emphasized. Again, the researcher was gravitated towards this method due to the chance that she would get to witness in close contact a "foreign" culture. The "foreignness" comes from the fact that she was not a member of the community selected. Furthermore as a novice in the Malaysian education system, the ethnographic research would also help the researcher to see how the products of the education system cope with the working world.

The area of research was also chosen due to very pragmatic reasons. As a foreigner who did not know many people in Malaysia, the researcher did not have many contacts and had to rely on her Malaysian family members. It was a family member who had a contact with the Light Chain of Hotels. This contact was willing to help the researcher in her research. Thus this opened a door for the researcher. After considering the fact that not many studies had been done in the field of tourism, especially one involving domestic tourism, the researcher decided to take up the opportunity to study the sales and marketing communicative events of that company.

3.3 Research Design

An ethnographic study is a qualitative study and as such, it is much of a data-driven research. The research questions that have been posed in Chapter 1 are general questions serving more as guidelines rather than specific or close-ended questions. As this is a data-driven research, the researcher tried not to have any preconceptions when she started the study.

There is no pre-set design to the study. In this situation, the ethnographer had to be adaptable to the situation. As an ethnographer, the researcher's ability to mould into the situation was very crucial to the success of the research. A pre-structured design would not be appropriate for this ethnographic study as the researcher, an outsider to the community, only had limited knowledge of the community under study. Perhaps it could be said that it was this lack of knowledge which is the reason behind the researcher's choice of study.

In this study, the researcher could not adhere to a fixed schedule. She had to be able to put herself in a position to gather whatever data was available. This need for schedule-flexibility was especially important as this study is in the field of sales and marketing. This is because the schedule of the staff is not set and thus the schedule of the researcher too could not be fixed. For instance, if there were a client asking one of the staff to meet at his (the client's) office, the researcher tried to tag along to observe the meeting. Sometimes, this happened at the last minute and even outside office hours. Thus flexibility and adaptability was very important in this study.

The actual research itself took four continuous weeks. The observation-based research was conducted at various sites depending on the situation. The sites included TM's office, a Dikari subsidiary's premises, clients' offices, a radio broadcast station, a shopping centre and even a restaurant. Besides observation of the communicative happenings, the researcher also conducted interviews, mostly impromptu, and gathered hard copies of data, especially written data such as letters, reports and brochures.

TM starts its operations at 8.30 a.m. and finishes at 6.00 p.m. However, staggered hours are practised by the staff as not all of them come in or finish at the same time. Staff could come in at 8.30 a.m. or at 9.30 a.m. Those who start earlier finish at 5.30 p.m. while those who came in later finish work at 6.30 p.m. Some might not even come into the office in the morning as they might have early appointments with clients and it is more time-efficient for them to go straight from home. The researcher had to adapt herself to this schedule. However, observation went smoothly and the researcher managed to gather satisfactory data.

As in any ethnographic research, the actual fieldwork was preceded by the pre-fieldwork (see Ainol, 1994). The pre-fieldwork consisted of how the researcher managed to get access to the company, in this case TM, to conduct her research.

3.3.1 Pre-fieldwork

As stated earlier, one of the researcher's family members knew a contact working for the Light Chain of Hotels (LCH). As the researcher did not know the contact person very well, she considered it as a very delicate situation. She then asked the family member to approach this insider to ask him to assist in any manner possible with the study. Due to the fact that the family member was not living in the same state as the insider, it took quite a while before she managed to speak to him. In the meantime, the researcher made it a point to stay at one of the hotels in the chain to sample the product.

After the first initial approach by the family member, the researcher contacted this insider herself. The researcher indicated her interest in conducting a study on sales and marketing. It was then that the researcher found out that the sales and marketing of Light Chain of Hotels was handled by another company, Total Management Sendirian Berhad. She was asked to contact the Sales and Marketing (S & M) Manager of TM. At the same time, the contact would also inform the S & M Manager himself. Thus a "hello" effect is achieved by which the researcher managed to get a contact to actually introduce the idea of the research to TM. It also helped that the contact was in the senior management level of LCH.

At this point, the research was still at the conceptualization stage. The researcher first planned to do a study on an individual, the Sales & Marketing Manager of TM himself. The researcher then set up an appointment to meet the aforementioned Manager. On the day of the appointment, the researcher went to the office at the appointed time. However, the S & M Manager was not around. After she had waited for a few hours, the S & M Manager called and apologised for not being able to make the appointment due to unforeseen circumstances. However the day did not go to a total waste, as the researcher managed to make initial observation of TM's premises.

The researcher made another appointment to meet the S & M Manager. At this initial interview, the researcher managed to gather information on the company and the S & M Manager himself. What was interesting was the fact that the subject preferred to have the interview at an informal setting. Together with a colleague from another of Dikari's subsidiary, the interview was conducted at a hawker centre. This was the researcher's first glimpse at the Sales and Marketing world where the staff tries to make whoever they come into contact with, in this case the researcher herself, as comfortable as possible.

At this interview, the researcher asked permission to record the conversation. However, the S & M Manager was not comfortable with the idea. As the researcher wanted to have reactions that are as natural as possible, the recorder was not produced. She could only take short notes to keep the conversation flow going.

The researcher found out that eye-contact was very important during an interview as whenever she broke the contact to make notes, the subject would stop talking and wait for the researcher to finish before continuing. This was extremely disruptive and awkward. Thus the researcher only managed to take short notes. It was also at this interview that the S & M Manager suggested that the research be not limited to his communicative acts alone as the whole staff in the sales and marketing section would have much to contribute to the study. This would also make the subject matter wider and more relevant to the study. Thus it was agreed that the subjects will include all the sales and marketing staff.

After the interview was over, the researcher went back to the office with the S & M Manager. He then went to see the General Manager (GM) of TM. The researcher was then informed to write in officially to LCH and TM asking permission to conduct the study.

After obtaining an official letter attesting that she was a bona fide researcher from the university she was attached to, the researcher wrote to the Group General Manager of LCH asking for permission to conduct the study. After waiting a few weeks, the researcher contacted the Group GM personally. The Group GM then asked the researcher to write in to TM directly. The researcher's letter addressed to the GM of TM was sent the following week. In it, the researcher gave particulars of the study, her contact number and address. A call then came from the S & M Manager of TM and he asked to meet the researcher personally to clarify the details of the research. This was a new S & M Manager as the previous one had resigned. An appointment was set.

The researcher met the new S & M Manager at his office. She conducted another interview with this new subject to find out his background. The interview went well and arrangements were made to start the study the week after. Certain boundaries were laid where documents like instruction manuals and annual reports would not be made available. Where accompanying staff to sales meeting was concerned, the researcher was not allowed to tag along for the first meeting as this was deemed to be a very crucial and sensitive part of sales and marketing. He was of the opinion that since the meeting would be with a prospective client and not a confirmed one, the one-to-one personal touch would play a very important role. It was felt that the client will feel more comfortable with just one representative as more than that might seem intimidating.

The researcher also offered to help in any way possible and the S & M Manager responded to the offer by asking the researcher to answer phone calls especially when the members of the staff were busy. The researcher also asked to be introduced as a student trainee during sales meetings to minimise any uncomfortable feelings that might be experienced by the clients. This was especially so if they knew that they were being observed. After the interview, the S& M Manager immediately introduced the researcher to all the staff present in the office including the accounting staff. This move was felt to be a good move as the staff was kept informed of the researcher's status before she began her research and thus they had time to psychologically prepare for the observation.

In this pre-fieldwork stage, negotiation of access to the company took the researcher quite some time. Though having a contact in the field was very helpful, the researcher had to be careful to ensure that the appropriate procedures were followed. There was a chain of command that the researcher must apply to in order to conduct her study and it was very important to start at the top.

3.3.2 <u>The Fieldwork Stage</u>

The fieldwork stage comprised of the actual observation of TM's communicative events. As part of the ethnographic exercise, the researcher would outline her activities during the observation period of the study.

On the first day, the researcher arrived at the office and was told that there was a weekly gathering to be attended. It was held at the premises of one of Dikari's subsidiaries. The researcher attended the gathering and "participated" as well as she could, to blend in with the crowd.

The researcher then waited for the S & M Manager. Upon his arrival, the S & M Manager introduced the researcher to the General Manager (GM) of Total Management Sendirian Berhad. The researcher had a short interview with the GM.

Afterwards, the researcher was introduced to all the other members of the staff who were not present during the researcher's initial meeting with the S & M Manager. They were very friendly and accommodating. The first day was basically filled with short interviews as and when the situation allowed. As two of the sales staff were on leave, the researcher once again offered to help in any way possible. Again the researcher was asked to answer the phone when the others were busy. Information on the pricing of rooms and blocking of bookings by individual hotels had been printed out on a piece of paper. This paper was pasted onto the desk near the phones. This made it easy for the researcher to answer any queries related to cost and availability of rooms. The Operations Officer also showed the researcher ways to gather other information that might be required by the client. This includes maps, addresses and phone numbers of the individual hotels. The researcher was also able to ask any questions relating to the calls easily as the Operations Officer was sitting beside her and she only needed to ask to clarify any queries.

On the second day, the researcher took her "rightful" place beside the Reservations Officer. This was to be the researcher's seat at TM's office until the end of the study. There was an extra line or phone which the researcher used to answer calls. The researcher was also able to observe the reactions of the Reservations Officer to walk-in clients from this counter.

As the setting of the office was not rigid, the researcher could also walk around and observe the happenings. When any of the staff had the time, the researcher would 'chat' with them. These 'chats' were actually interviews where the researcher gathered more information, clarification or confirmation of the researcher's own observation. The researcher was also allowed to go through some of the files. These files included correspondence of the staff with clients, reservation and cancellation forms and newspaper clippings relating to the hotel industry.

Like their working hours, the mealtimes of the staff were also staggered to ensure that there would always be somebody present at the office to entertain walk-in or call-in clients. Unlike employees in other companies who have fixed meal times (e.g. 1 p.m. – 2 p.m.), times for meals for TM staff were not fixed. It all depended on the availability of colleagues who were able to cover the duties of answering calls and entertaining walk-in clients. Members of the staff were conscious of the fact that if they took too much time for their meals, their colleagues would have to bear the burden of hunger, not to mention being short-handed. Thus the staff did not dally during meals. The researcher made it a point to take her meals with the staff as it was an opportunity to gather more information.

All information and observation were 'jotted' down on a computer notebook. The researcher found that the notebook was very useful as it cut down on the voyeuristic effect. It also enabled the researcher to blend in with an office environment.

The first week was basically spent in the office where the researcher got to know the 'basics' of the office system. In the second week, the researcher requested to accompany any of the Sales & Marketing staff who had appointments with their clients. The sales staff acquiesced and brought the researcher to several of their meetings. During the meetings, the researcher was introduced as a student trainee attached to the company or simply by name. When the researcher was introduced as a student trainee on attachment, the clients did not seem to be affected by this information and the meeting went on naturally. In such situations, the researcher jotted down notes on an actual notebook. The researcher found that she could not take notes too obviously. This was again a matter of ensuring a smooth and natural flow of conversation. It was felt that if the researcher concentrated too much on writing her observations down, the client might become suspicious and uncomfortable. As the researcher did not want to jeopardise the situation, most of the notes were brief ones to be elaborated further when the researcher was alone.

There were occasions when the researcher could not accompany the sales staff involved. These include first-time meetings where the boundaries had already been laid by the S & M Manager and one occasion of a night-time entertainment session. Due to personal reasons the researcher could not attend the latter. For these occasions, the researcher had to rely totally on the informants' information and interpretation.

The researcher was also able to accompany the S & M Manager to a local radio broadcast station. Though the radio program focussed on another of Dikari's subsidiaries, a tour agency, TM was involved in the sponsorship of a prize for a contest.

Observation was also made during a tourism exhibition/fair in which TM was involved. The fair was held at a shopping centre and the researcher was able to see the sales staff in action in selling their product. As electrical outlets were provided, the researcher took notes on the notebook computer.

3.4 Data Collection Tools

In an ethnographic study the tools for the collection data can vary depending on the situation. Saville-Troike states:

> "Appropriate procedures depend on the relationship of the ethnographer and the speech community, the type of data being collected, and the particular situation in which fieldwork is being conducted."
>
> (Saville Troike, 1989:117)

In this study, the researcher used several tools in collecting data. They are observation, interviews and the examination of relevant documents.

3.4.1 Observation

Ethnographic studies rely heavily on the researcher's keen sense of observation. The researcher needs to be sensitive of the communicative events that are taking place. The two methods of observing are participant and non-participant observation. As the study is comprehensive in nature, the observation will include "all theoretically salient aspects of a setting, conducting a broad spectrum of observation, with mapping the site, census taking, and interviewing" (Watson-Gegeo, 1988:584).

Participant observation is the ideal ethnographic tool but when the situation does not allow it, non-participant observation will have to suffice. This study applied both methods of observation depending on the situation.

The researcher's use of non-participant observation can be seen in the light that the researcher was not a member of the discourse community. The researcher's entry into the community was made known to all the staff of TM. Unlike in the case of another ethnographic researcher, Ainol (1993), whose real identity was masked under an official role of Trainee Assistant Supervisor, the researcher's identity was not kept a secret. Without an official role, the researcher conducted her observation separated by the subject's knowledge of the reason for the presence of a stranger. This was an advantage of non-participant observation as the researcher was not burdened with the responsibility of doing any work.

One problem foreseen was that the subjects might feel uncomfortable and may even be resentful of the presence of a stranger who would be observing their every move. However, the problem did not materialise. The reasons could be due to the fact that in the field of sales and marketing, the staff has to be friendly in nature. This nature was a boon to the researcher. The researcher also tried to avoid any resentment by being as helpful as possible.

Though the staff knew of the researcher's actual identity, the clients did not. As far as the client was concerned, the researcher was another member of the community. During meetings, the researcher was introduced as student trainee or just by her name. Thus the researcher possessed two roles; participant and non-participant observer. The researcher's role as a participant observer became more obvious when she handled phone-calls. The caller assumed that the researcher was an actual member of the TM staff and the researcher did her best to emulate the staff of TM. The participant observation method is deemed to be the best method especially when the researcher handled phone calls. By using this method, the researcher was not limited to observing one side of the conversation. A hands-on experience meant that the researcher was able to observe (or listen) to both sides of the conversation. The relatively easy task of handling phone calls also did not put too much pressure on the researcher. If there were any problems or complicated queries, the researcher could easily transfer the call to any of the staff of TM.

The covert nature of the participant observation method meant that the subjects under study (in this case the clients) did not know that they were being studied. Thus there is a question of ethicality. To minimise the problem, the researcher limited her observation to the public domain and confidentiality was strictly kept. By 'public domain' the researcher meant that only information deemed relevant to the study is revealed and this information would not have been told in confidence or meant to be kept as a secret. Here the researcher's own conscience plays a very important part.

As stated earlier, all observations were jotted down, either into a computer notebook or a field notebook. The computer notebook proved to be very useful in minimising the voyeuristic effect. The researcher was able to take down notes without making anyone feel uncomfortable as the atmosphere of typing into a computer was duplicated at several workstations. During meetings and interviews, the researcher jotted down notes on a field notebook. However, it was impossible to jot down extensive written notes. Therefore the researcher had to rely on her memory. The short notes were used as a catalyst to remember the details of the meeting. More in-depth notes were written down when the researcher was alone. At the end of each day, the researcher gathered all the information on her notebook computer.

Audio/visual recordings are often used in ethnographic studies to provide the means for a more detailed observation. Although the researcher felt that this method would indeed help the study, the Sales and Marketing Manager expressed deep reservations against this method. Thus as a sign of respect, audio/visual recording was not used. The researcher was also made aware of the disruptive nature of recordings where the researcher had to interrupt, or at least disturb, the event by having to change the tape when it had run out (see Johns, 1998). At times, the quality of the recording can also leave much to be desired. Thus audio/visual recordings were not used for this study.

3.4.2 Interviews

The method of interviewing a subject is also a staple of ethnography. In this study, both formal and informal interviews were conducted. The formal interviews were conducted with senior managers of TM. The purpose of these formal interviews was to get a sense of the corporate culture which the company embraced. Though some of the questions asked in these interviews were planned, they were mostly open-ended, leaving doors open for any possibility or additional queries.

Informal interviews were conducted as and when they were possible. Any opportunity to ask questions was fully utilised. These interviews were usually not planned. The places where these interviews were conducted included accidental meetings in the corridors, in the car on the way to a meeting, meal-time situations, etc. The informal interviews were also conducted with open-ended questions.

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The main aim of having these formal and informal interviews was to gather data on the subjects' own views of their communicative actions. It was with these views that the researcher triangulated the data gathered from her own observation. The triangulation was very important as the researcher's conclusion from her observation might not correspond to the informant's perceptions. When this happened, the informants' views were given priority as they were the bona fide members of the community and thus were experts in their field.

Another function of these interviews was to fill in gaps in the researcher's knowledge. This is especially so when the researcher could not be present at a certain communicative event such as the first-time meetings and the entertainment session.

3.4.3 Gathering of relevant documents

Another source for data are hard copies of relevant documents. These documents included letters, chart, and reports, press clippings, pamphlets and brochures. These documents were collected to support (or otherwise) data gathered from the researcher's observation. These artefacts are important, not only for triangulation purposes, but also to be analysed as communicative events in their own right.

The notebook computer again proved to be useful in the gathering of hard data. As most of the staff type their letters on the computer, the researcher just had to copy these letters on a diskette. Before this could happen, the researcher of course had to ask permission from the officer-in-charge. The researcher also had to photocopy letters from the clients and press clippings. Pamphlets and brochures were easily obtained as they were placed on the reception counter for any prospective clients.